

WOMEN'S LEAGUE FOR CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

Proposed Resolutions for 2012

SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL

BACKGROUND

An essential element of the mission of Women's League for Conservative Judaism is to reinforce bonds with Israel and Jews worldwide by nurturing a real sense of Ahavat Zion (love of Israel) among its members. To that end, Women's League promotes a Six Point Program for Israel:

- Zionist philosophy
- Support of the Conservative /Masorti movement in Israel, its synagogues and women's groups
- Tourism
- Aliyah
- Religious pluralism
- Social action

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS Women's League has expressed its support of Israel and demonstrated its commitment to this mission with a variety of programs including educational programs in North America and Israel, social action campaigns, and Women's League missions to Israel,

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that Women's League for Conservative Judaism:

- Commits to continue and strengthen its support for the Masorti Movement in Israel;
- Commits to encourage and develop programming and information that educates its members in issues relevant to Israel today, including, but not limited to pluralism, and gender discrimination;
- Commits to encourage each of its affiliated groups to present at least one Israel program each year;
- Commits to work with the larger Jewish community on efforts to end the efforts at boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel;
- Commends the efforts of MERCAZ in its Israel Advocacy work and encourages our sisterhoods to promote membership in MERCAZ on a yearly basis.

GENDER EQUALITY IN PUBLIC SECULAR SPACES IN ISRAEL

BACKGROUND

Israel was established as a democratic state. Its Declaration of Independence proclaims that Israel will "uphold the full social and political equity of all of its citizens, without distinction of race, creed, or sex."

There have been increasing incidences attempting to enforce gender segregation in public, secular places in Israel. Gender-based discrimination has occurred on sidewalks, streets, public buildings, and most notably some public buses, where it has become common practice to force women to sit in the back. Women in such public spaces have been the victims of physical violence and abuse.

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS the Israeli Supreme Court has ruled forced gender segregation on public buses to be illegal, yet the number of bus lines that force women to the back of the bus has grown;

WHEREAS rabbis and organizations in Israel, the United States and Canada have joined in condemning forced gender segregation in public and the use of violence against women and children, stressing that nothing in Jewish religious tradition condones this behavior,

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that Women's league for Conservative Judaism through its sisterhood and region leadership:

- Actively supports the ideal that every person, regardless of gender, deserves equal access and use of public services and public secular places;
- Speaks out in opposition to discriminatory acts and behavior that seek to enforce gender segregation in the public, secular sphere;
- Advocates for the effective enforcement of laws that forbid gender segregation in public secular spaces in Israel;
- Commits to directly communicating with members of Knesset and government officials, advancing awareness of this problem, and supporting opportunities to help resolve it.

EQUALITY OF TREATMENT IN ISRAELI HOTELS

(The Masorti Foundation has asked the various arms of the Conservative/Masorti movement to approve this resolution. The RA, JEA, NAASE and the Schechter Day School Network have already done so.)

BACKGROUND

It has become increasingly the case that when Masorti/Conservative groups have wished to *daven* in Israeli hotels, they have been denied the use of hotel-owned *Sifrei Torah* if the service was not in accordance with Orthodox practice. In some cases the hotels have offered to locate a *Sefer Torah* from outside the hotel at an additional fee to the guests. In other cases it became necessary for guests to make arrangements on their own.

RESOLUTION

Whereas Israel is the homeland for all Jewish People;

Whereas Women's League is on record as encouraging both aliyah and **tourism** to Israel;

Whereas Women's League is **committed to religious pluralism in Israel** and the fair treatment of all streams of Judaism;

Whereas many hotels in Israel have refused to provide access to the use of *Sifrei Torah* to Masorti/Conservative groups and guests wishing to *daven* on Torah reading days, or have only permitted access when such groups and guests pay additional fees and *Sifrei Torah* are brought in from outside the hotel;

Therefore Be It Resolved that Women's League for Conservative Judaism calls upon the Israeli Hotel Association and all Israeli hotels to treat Jews of all denominations equally and to afford Jews and all

groups of non-Orthodox streams any of the rights and privileges afforded Orthodox guests including the use of a synagogue and a *Sefer Torah*.

- Be it further resolved that Women's League for Conservative Judaism call upon all Masorti/Conservative groups to patronize hotels that follow this policy;
- Be it further resolved that Women's League for Conservative Judaism will notify the Israel Ministry of Tourism, the Israeli Hotel Association and Israel tour group operators of this policy; and,
- Be it further resolved that Women's League for Conservative Judaism will encourage other arms of the Movement and other denominations to adopt a similar policy and shall work with them to effect change.

GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER (GLBT) JEWS (2012)

BACKGROUND

The 2006 teshuvah "Homosexuality, Human Dignity and Halakhah" (by Rabbis Elliot Dorff, Daniel Nevins and Avram Reisner) effectively normalizes the status of gay and lesbian Jews in the Jewish community. Extending the 1992 Committee on Jewish Law and Standards' consensus statement, gay and lesbian Jews are to be welcomed into our synagogues and other institutions as full members with no restrictions. Furthermore, gay or lesbian Jews who demonstrate the depth of Jewish commitment, knowledge, faith, and desire to serve as rabbis, cantors and educators shall be welcomed to apply to our professional schools and associations. Heterosexual marriage between two Jews remains the halakhic ideal. For homosexuals, the rabbinic prohibitions that have been associated with other gay and lesbian intimate acts are superseded based upon the talmudic principle of *kvod habriot*, our obligation to preserve the human dignity of all people.

This teshuvah did not rule on the halakhic status of gay and lesbian relationships. The authors indicated that to do so would require the development of ceremonies and legal instruments for creating and dissolving such unions. In 2012, Rabbis Dorff, Nevins and Reisner wrote an appendix to their teshuvah, "Rituals and Documents of Marriage and Divorce for Same Sex Couples," that provides examples of rituals and documents that conform to the halakhic requirements they set out. They state, "We are convinced that the nomenclature of gay marriage and divorce should be equal and clearly stated as such, not obscured in ambiguous language. Thus, even though the halakhic mechanism for binding the couple together is distinct from the traditional model of *kiddushin*, the result is still a Jewish marriage. The status of this relationship in civil law will depend upon the jurisdiction within which the ceremony occurs and the reciprocal recognition rules in the state/province where the couple resides. Performance of the Jewish wedding ceremony is not to be considered a civil marriage in those jurisdictions which prohibit same-sex marriage."

RESOLUTION

Whereas, gay and lesbian Jews have experienced not only the constant threats of physical violence and homophobic rejection, but also the pains of anti-Semitism known to all Jews and, additionally, a sense of painful alienation from their own religious institutions;

Whereas, there have been attempts in both the U.S. and Canada to define marriage to preclude the marriage of gays and lesbians; and

Whereas, gays and lesbians in committed relationships are, in many arenas, still denied benefits afforded heterosexual couples, such as: denial of access to partner when the partner is ill; denial of the ability to adopt; and denial of the ability of one partner to share medical benefits with the other;

Therefore, Be it Resolved that Women's League for Conservative Judaism:

- Deplores the violence against GLBT's in our society;
- Reiterates that, as are all Jews, gay men and lesbians are welcome as members in our congregations;
- Supports full civil equality for gays and lesbians. The same benefits afforded heterosexual couples should be afforded same sex couples;
- Calls upon our sisterhoods to run programs to increase awareness, understanding and concern for our fellow Jews who are gay and lesbian; and
- Calls on sisterhoods to advocate against local and Federal laws that discriminate against GLBT individuals.

HYDROFRACKING

(Acknowledging both the JCPA and RA resolutions on this subject which are the basis for this resolution)

BACKGROUND

Energy independence is an environmentally sound precept and should be pursued. In Genesis 2:15 God commands us "to work the earth and to protect it" (*l'ovdah ul'shomrah*), and in the rich tradition of laws based on Deuteronomy 20:19, not to destroy wantonly (*bal tashhit*) any part of the created world.

Hydraulic Fracturing, also known as hydrofracturing or fracking, is the extraction of natural gas from previously impermeable shale. The process uses one to four million gallons of water withdrawn from streams and rivers, sand, and 20,000 pounds of chemicals injected at high pressure into horizontally drilled wells, some as deep as 10,000 feet below the surface. The pressure causes the shale to crack. These cracks are held open by the sand particles and chemicals to allow the natural gas to escape.

Hydrofracking is underway in a number of states and provinces and is being considered in several more.

RESOLUTION

Whereas, serious questions have been raised regarding the effects of injected chemical agents, runoff into streams and rivers, and the possible changing of the environmental structure of the shale itself deep within the earth caused by hydrofracking,

Therefore, Be It Resolved that Women's League for Conservative Judaism:

- Calls on the appropriate authorities in the U.S. and Canada to require companies undertaking this process of hydrofracking to provide full disclosure to the appropriate governmental authorities of all materials used before, during and after the hydrofracking process (This includes levels and concentrations of toxicity, without exceptions for 'trade secrets', and

assuring that all contracts with landowners clearly include this information. Appropriate safeguards to protect public health and the environment should be adopted and enforced based on the identification of impacts.);

- Calls on sisterhoods to participate in educational programs both in the Jewish and the general communities about the potential benefits and risks of hydrofracking;
- Calls on sisterhoods to educate their communities about the extraction of natural gas and oil by hydrofracking and about relevant Jewish perspectives on the issue; and
- Calls on sisterhoods to support the preservation of unique and/or sensitive areas by encouraging local entities to put them off limits to gas drilling to be determined by an appropriate science-based process.

HUNGER

BACKGROUND

The Torah and Jewish tradition explicitly command us to feed the hungry. “And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I the Eternal am your God” (Leviticus 23:22). Deuteronomy 15:7-10 states, “If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren... you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.” In the Talmud we are instructed that each Jewish community should establish a fund to provide food for the hungry; this is one of our most important responsibilities. The Talmud also reminds us that “just as God clothed the naked, so too must you supply clothes for the naked [poor]” (BT Sotah 14a); and informs us that work brings dignity to the worker, as the Talmud (Nedarim 49b) says, “Great is work, for it honors the workers.”

US: According to the 2010 Federal census, 46.2 million Americans are living in poverty, the largest number ever on record, including 22 percent of all children. Social safety net programs such as food stamps (SNAP) and the Earned Income Tax Credit have been proven to prevent millions of Americans from falling below the poverty line. Because of the Federal deficit, many of these programs have been cut or are targeted for cuts.

Canada: The Canadian definition of “low income” cutoff is twice that of the U.S. so the numbers in the two countries cannot be compared. However, 16.2 percent of Canadians live in poverty; a large number of these are children.

RESOLUTION

Whereas, a significant number of Americans and Canadians are living in poverty,

Therefore, Be It Resolved that Women’s League for Conservative Judaism calls upon sisterhoods to:

- Educate their members about the issues of hunger and encourage them to contact all government authorities to insure continued or reinstated benefits for a range of social services addressing hunger. [In the U.S. these include nutrition assistance (SNAP), Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and the Child Nutrition Act];
- Support Mazon, A Jewish Response to Hunger, at their functions;
- Link a project to collect for a food bank with a major sisterhood program;

- Provide opportunities to members to work in a food bank or other local organization that deals with hunger. Hold a Hunger Seder during the months of March or April (<http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org/Hagaddah/HungerSederHagaddah.pdf>); and
- Encourage their members to take the Food Stamp Challenge where they will personally spend only \$31.50, the average food stamp benefit, for food in a week to experience the challenges of hunger. For information, see: http://engage.jewishpublicaffairs.org/c/627/p/salsa/web/common/public/content?content_item_KEY=9360

WOMEN'S BODILY AUTONOMY

BACKGROUND

Biblical and rabbinic sources provide the background for the Conservative Jewish response to a woman's right to bodily autonomy and to the relative rights of a woman versus a fetus. (This resolution is based upon the 2012 Rabbinical Assembly resolution on this subject.)

In Exodus 21:22-23 we read: "When men fight, and one of them pushes a pregnant woman and a miscarriage results, but no other damage ensues, the one responsible shall be fined... But if other damage ensues, the penalty shall be life for life..." which determines that only the woman is a *nefesh*, living person, not the fetus.

This understanding of the status of a fetus is supported by Leviticus 24:17: "If anyone kills any human being, he shall be put to death." (Leviticus 24:17) In the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (21:12), the midrash teaches that a fetus is not a living person: "The Torah says [one who strikes] a man (Exodus 21:12), meaning a viable human being, to exclude the fetus."

Furthermore, Mishnah Ohalot 7:6 also teaches: "If a woman is having difficulty in giving birth [and her life is in danger], one cuts up the fetus within her womb and extracts it limb by limb, because her life takes precedence over that of the fetus. But if the greater part was already born, one may not touch it, for one may not set aside one person's life for that of another," which is understood to mean that a woman whose life is endangered by a pregnancy is permitted to end the pregnancy.

Likewise, there is the understanding that grave psychological distress is a legitimate reason to end a pregnancy. Thus we find in the teshuvah of R. Eliezer Waldenberg, Responsa *Tzitz Eliezer*, part 13, No. 102: "One should permit...abortion as soon as it becomes evident without doubt from the test that, indeed, such a baby (Tay-Sachs baby) shall be born, even until the seventh month of her pregnancy...If, indeed, we may permit an abortion according to the halakhah because of 'great need' and because of pain and suffering, it seems that this is the classic case for such permission. And it is irrelevant in what way the pain and suffering is expressed, whether it is physical or psychological. Indeed, psychological suffering is in many ways much greater than the suffering of the flesh."

RESOLUTION

Whereas, biblical and rabbinic sources provide the background for the Conservative Jewish response to a woman's right to bodily autonomy and to the relative rights of a woman versus a fetus,

Therefore, Be it Resolved that Women's League for Conservative Judaism calls upon its sisterhoods to:

- Educate their members about the Jewish perspective on when life begins utilizing the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards teshuvot on the subject;
- Support full access for all women to the entire spectrum of reproductive healthcare;
- Urge its members to oppose all efforts by governmental, private entities or individuals to limit such access or to require unnecessary procedures; and

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE**

BACKGROUND

“Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment or religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” (*Bill of Rights, Article 1*)

While we are deeply committed to the fostering of religion in the home and by the synagogue, we are equally committed to the American belief that religion is private and personal and should not be controlled, interfered with or supported by government or state agencies. We believe that the principle of separation of Church and State has contributed greatly to the preservation of our democratic form of government and has strengthened religious groups in our country.

Tax law in the United States forbids churches and other 501(c)(3) nonprofits to intervene in elections. There have been multiple cases recently of clergy who have exhorted their congregants to vote in a particular way. The Alliance Defense Fund actively campaigns for churches to violate tax law and endorse candidates in the November election.

The responsibility of the government is to treat all citizens equally. Local governments have introduced prayers at the beginning of their meetings. A Federal district court struck down the practice of opening meetings of the Sussex County Council in Delaware with the Lord’s Prayer. An appeals court declared the use of mostly Christian invocations by the Greece, NY Town Board unconstitutional. Courts, however, have allowed non-sectarian invocations. These also pose problems since it is hard to define “non-sectarian.” How does one invoke a non-sectarian prayer which would be acceptable to non-believers or people who define God in non-traditional ways?

Several states, including Missouri, Florida, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Alaska, Arizona, Wyoming and Mississippi, have had or will have attempts made to water down church-state protections. Schools in a Connecticut school district had been holding their graduation ceremonies in a church. A suit was brought indicating that holding graduation ceremonies in a church violated First Amendment guarantees of religious liberty. A preliminary injunction barred the use of the church.

School voucher programs that tax all Americans to support religious education violate the individual right of conscience. Abuses have been hallmarks of voucher programs. A Louisiana voucher plan uses tax dollars to support religious education. There are also public charter schools that are religious in nature.

RESOLUTION

Whereas, Women’s League for Conservative Judaism remains firm in its support of the separation of Church and State,

Therefore Be It Resolved that Women’s League for Conservative Judaism calls on its Sisterhoods to:

- Make their members aware of separation of Church and State issues;
- Encourage its members to be active locally to stand up for separation of Church and State; and
- Encourage its members to report to the IRS infractions of the tax law by churches or other 501(c)(3) organizations of which they become aware.

*** The Canadian view on Church and State is largely similar to the view in the U.S. However, the Canadian constitution acknowledges that Canada is founded “under the supremacy of God.” Canadian religious schools in certain provinces receive government funding.*